

Flying the Pointy-Nosed Glider



Hornet photo by Matthew Thomas
Background photo by Jeremy Williams
Composite by Yvonne Dawson

by LCdr. Marc Pritchard

We were just days away from a six-week RIMPAC exercise. As the operations officer, I was pushing to get all of the FCLPs out while maintaining a bit of tactical flying for myself before deployment. Our maintenance department was working hard to get all of the aircraft ready. One was coming out of the CIT MOD and another, 403, was ready to go after the mechs reworked the innards of the No. 4 fuel cell.

The phone rang just after noon: 403 was ready for a check flight. All they needed was the stick actuator. Jumping on that call, I bounded downstairs, read the book, suited up, and strapped in for what I thought would be an uneventful 1.0 of flight time.

I started both engines. The checklist says to shut them down one at a time using the fire light, and then restart using bleed air from

the operating engine. After doing the procedure on the left engine, I punched the fire light for the right. I expected the right engine to eventually shut down because of fuel starvation, but I was surprised when the left engine began to unwind. I quickly advanced the left throttle, figuring I must not have seated it firmly in the ground-idle position. The engine returned to its normal idle rpm. Satisfied that I had caused and then corrected the problem, I sat there, still waiting for the right engine to quit. But once again, before the right engine dropped off line, the left engine spooled down.

I called for the mechs and other troubleshooters to check for causes of the left-engine flameout. With no answers forthcoming and still not convinced that this could have somehow just been the work of “stray trons,” I decided to take it from the top. After removing all power from the aircraft, I restarted the jet

and completed all ground checks without incident.

I did a little on-the-fly ORM and asked myself, “Hey! What if this engine thing happens while I’m airborne?” Had I been smart enough to stop and figure out the answer to that question, I wouldn’t be writing this article. But since doing what you know is right rarely makes as good a story, and the voices of reason in my head were being outshouted by the clamor to get the job done, I pressed on. Besides, the odds against a dual-engine flameout in a Hornet had to be astronomically in my favor.

Nonetheless, the question of what you would do in an airplane with two dead motors is a good one. You can scour the manual for eternity looking for the answer. It isn’t exactly a standard FA-18 procedure, you understand. As I taxied out of the line, I came up with a game plan I could use if the remotest of remote rarities were to happen. I figured I’d just dump the nose, reset both fire lights, keep the airspeed up, and one of the engines should restart.

Just like it took less than a rocket scientist to go flying in that jet, it doesn’t quite take a brain surgeon to figure out where this story is going. Crossing into the operating area over the Sierra Nevadas (the geography will come into play shortly), I descended to 18,000 feet at around 300 knots to start the checks. After completing the same fire-light shutdown that I had done on the left engine on deck, and with the engine back on line, I pressed the right fire light. Imagine my surprise when both engines spooled down.

At 18,000 feet over the Sierra Nevadas, you are only 4,000 to 6,000 feet above the rocks. Normally, in a powered aircraft or one with a glide ratio better than a Lady Kenmore, this is not a problem. I, unfortunately, wasn’t flying either of those, and the laughter from the warning voices I ignored back in the chocks was deafening.

Dusting off the brief I had given myself on the taxiway, I dumped the nose, reset the fire lights, kept up my airspeed, and waited for


one of the engines to relight. I was amazed at how quiet it was.

After 10 to 15 seconds that seemed like an eternity, the rapid restart I had hoped for was obviously not forthcoming. The engines, in fact, had continued to slow, and the rpms were settling down through the high teens. At this point, my training took over. I realized I needed to clean up the cockpit and prepare for ejection. I loosened my mask so I could breathe (something that hadn’t been a priority for the last couple of minutes), took off my kneeboard cards, and got my body in position.

The engines were rotating enough to provide hydraulic power to the actuators, so the stick-and-rudder aspects of flying a pointy-nosed glider were not that demanding. I continued to keep the knots up and was far enough over the mountains that Owens Valley was quickly approaching. With a small canyon providing me additional altitude to trade for airspeed, I made my way down.

I would like to tell you how my ejection plans were progressing, but I was still in denial, trying to come up with some way not to let down the team. I ran through possible

continued on page 24



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